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Thomas, Timothy R.

The life of Timothy R. Thomas

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THE LIFE

OF

TIMOTHY R. THOMAS,

WHO WAS

EXECUTED AT FISHERTON GAOL, WILTS,

March 19th, 1827,

FOR

The Murder of Mary Ann Taylor,

NEAR MARLBOROUGH:

Compiled from an Account written by Himself.

TOGETHER WITH A RELATION

OF HIS

CONVERSION TO GOD AND HAPPY DEATH.

BY I. BAKER,

Wesleyan Minister.

PRINTED BY BRODIE AND DOWDING, SALISBURY;

And sold by them, and all other Booksellers.

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LIFE

THE LIFE,

&c.

I WAS born in London, July 7, 1797, of respectable parents; my father kept a public house until the year 1804, when he failed in business, and afterwards held the office of a tide-waiter. My father used sometimes to take me on board the vessels he visited, and here I first felt an inclination to a seafaring life, and here also I was first encouraged to commit sin, by a sailor named Fielding, and though the crime was apparently trivial, (throwing a stone through a window at a girl of the town, and for which he hung a half doubloon about my neck as a reward), yet it made me proud of my wickedness, and I now see, how necessary it is, that parents should not only guard their children against those who are wicked of their own age, but wicked persons generally. That same day Fielding took me on board the vessel with him, and kept me all night, while my dear mother was almost distracted, and had the bell-man to cry me, as lost or stolen; for this act I was severely corrected by my father, and it was the only correction I ever received from him.

On the 30th of April, 1806, my dear mother died; this was about six months after I had been sent to the St. Ann's Free School, where the children of freemen are educated from seven years of age to eleven, and are then sent three years to a school four miles in the country, (belonging to the same society) to finish their education. Being now left to the care of my sister, and having been the darling of my mother, I began to

resist my sister's authority and advice, and took up with the company of wicked abandoned boys; indeed, if any in the neighbourhood were more mischievous than others, they were my companions. In consequence of this, I soon lost the recollection of those lessons of morality taught me by my dear mother, (with whom I had frequently attended at the Surrey Chapel), and being in the habit of visiting at an aunt's, my mother's sister, my evil and covetous heart began to desire the possession of what was not my own, and thus from small things I went on to greater, from crime to crime, until I have now to suffer for my guilt.

I was visiting one day at my aunt's, when I contrived to get to a drawer and steal a silver shirt button; this I kept concealed for several days, and then offered it to a school-mate in exchange for marbles; the usher happening to see this, reported it to the master; he enquired where I obtained it; I added lying to theft, and the master suspecting it, sent for my father; when he came, I was forced to confess the whole; for this I was severely flogged, had a bell tied round my neck, and was not allowed to go home to dinner for a week: this treatment hardened and made me stubborn, as punishment was all I had to dread, having no correct idea of moral crime.* I now became acquainted with three or four boys who were professed thieves, and by them I was encouraged to steal; from my father I stole a seven-shilling piece, which I kept so secret, that it was never discovered; this emboldened me, and I stole another; this was missed, but I was not suspected, as

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* This, as well as the sequel, shews, how utterly improper and insufficient mere flagellation is, to point out the nature of moral crime; and if only half the time spent in too many public schools, in administering such kind of correction, (intended no doubt to instruct as well as punish, and thus treating children as though they were no more capable of reasoning than a horse) were but employed in reasoning with them on the impropriety and evil tendency of such conduct, it would certainly be more successful.

Had this unfortunate man, at the time of committing this, his first theft, been reasoned with, instead of being so severely corrected, he might have stolen no more, and probably have avoided his untimely end; but flogging is not so much trouble for a master as reasoning.

he thought it lost in giving change. I now thought I would venture farther; and being at dinner one day with a relative of my mother's, I stole a silver tea-spoon; this I carried to a pawnbroker's to pledge, but, to my surprise, the shopman refused to take it on pledge, but detained it, and bid me to fetch my parents; this I never mentioned to any one, and when after a week the spoon was missing, I was not thought of. Passing one day by the shop, the man recognised me, took me into the shop, and I was compelled to tell my father's residence; they then sent—my sister came; she said she knew the spoon, but that it was not sent to pledge; for this the pawnbroker flogged me, and a complaint was made to the school; here I was severely punished; a ticket with thief written on it was placed on my back, and a bell around my neck, for a week; this hardened me more; and through the advice of my associates, I ventured again, stole a silver table-spoon from my aunt, pawned it, and spent the money with my companions.

October 5, 1808, I was sent by rotation to the Society's school in the country, by which means I was separated from my companions, and in six months after they were transported; I, however, did not desist from my wicked practices, but began robbing orchards, and when I found my father's allowance of pocket money (three shillings a week) was not so much as I wished to spend, I procured keys and robbed the boxes of my schoolmates; this led to a complaint, which coming to the ears of the schoolmaster in town, he pointed me out as likely to be the thief; I heard a search was to be made, so I threw the keys away, and as I took nothing but money, I was not discovered. I then robbed the servant's box of a 2*l.* note, and when I went home at the holidays I changed it at a grocer's in Tooley-street, for a quarter pound of tea; the tea I threw over London bridge, and hid the money to use as occasion required; after my return to school I got into the master's bed-room, and stole a one-pound note out of his drawer.

July 7, 1811, I left school without being found out in

my robberies; my father got me a place as errand-boy at a cutler's in Great New-street, Fetter-lane, Holborn; in this place I stopped four months, during which I robbed my master of several dozen of pocket and table knives, and a twenty-pound note out of the desk, and though this note was missed, suspicion did not rest on me; great part of this money I lost in gambling, which I now began to learn.——Feb. 4th, 1812, I was bound an apprentice to a bookbinder in Philip's-lane, London Wall; of this I soon grew weary, as I did not like the confinement, not being allowed to ramble about until what hour I pleased; I soon therefore began to quarrel with my master, and he had me before the Alderman at Guildhall; but as I made a lie, that he used me ill, and persisted in it, I was sent back without punishment, and my poor master fined forty shillings.

I robbed my master of several articles of wearing apparel and pawned them, and once I robbed Rivington's shop of two books, when sent there with work by my master.——Whitsunday, 1812, all the apprentices had liberty for the day, and as I knew my master and mistress would be from home, I embraced the opportunity, and robbed my master of a silver table spoon and twenty-eight pounds in cash; the spoon I took to make them think it was a stranger; that I threw over Blackfriar's bridge, and hid the money until the next day;—nor was I suspected. The next day I went to Greenwich fair and began gambling, and though I did not care much about gaining or losing, I won nearly forty pounds. In the evening I went to the theatre, in company with a young man, an acquaintance, and his sister; the play was George Barnwell, or The London Apprentice; this was so descriptive of my case, and my stings of conscience so great, that I could not remain in the house, and prevailed on my companions to leave with me; from this place I should have returned to my master's, but that the young man prevailed on me to go and have a glass of brandy and water at a noted house for bad characters; here I soon forgot all I felt at the theatre, begun to gamble, won nearly

eighty pounds, made the young woman, Mary Linsey, drink until she was intoxicated, and the consequence was, she became a ruined character.*

On returning to my master's the next morning, I was asked, where I had been; I said, to see George Barnwell, and had stayed with my friends all night. I was reprimanded, ordered to go to no such places, and bid go into the shop to set it in order; this I would not do, as the holidays were not over, but went out and spent the day in gambling and drinking; when I returned to my master's, I was reprimanded for leaving contrary to his orders; I said I would have what the other apprentices had; from words we came to blows, and I bruised his face so badly that he could not attend to his business for some time. The next morning I set off, and spent the day with Mary Linsey (who was about sixteen years of age) and her brother; in the evening we went to the theatre, and I did not return to my master's that night; the next morning when I returned, some words arose between my master and me, he threatened to have me before the Alderman for my bad behaviour to him, the workmen and apprentices, but I wickedly laughed at him, and ridiculed both his threatenings and advice.

This conduct came to my father's ears, and my master had me before the Alderman at the Guildhall; by him I was sentenced to the punishment of what is termed *Little Ease*, (a mode of correction for the City apprentices), a board about two inches thick and three feet square comes down on the shoulders, and the person is so placed that he can neither stand upright or sit down; this punishment, together with a threat of worse if I transgressed again, made me resolve to run away from my master; this I accomplished of a Sabbath

* Had he stopped at the Theatre until the close of the performance, it is probable that he would have as entirely got rid of every sting which he felt in his conscience, as in this house of ill-fame; for whatever there may be in the moral of George Barnwell that is good, the entertainment which follows, will be sure to erase every impression of a good moral tendency, which may have been made.

morning, and went and took lodgings for myself and the girl (Mary Linsey) in East Smithfield; with her I lived in this evil way from the 31st of May, 1812, to the 19th of October following, continuing my old practices of gambling and visiting the different places of public amusement. On the morning of the day last mentioned, I happened to be at a gambling-house, where I won upwards of ninety-five pounds, when taking up a newspaper, I saw an advertisement describing my person, offering a reward of five pounds for information of me, threatening those with prosecution who employed me, and offering me pardon if I would return. On seeing this, I went to my lodgings and told Mary Linsey that I would have a voyage at sea, and would not return to my distressed father and kind master, as I ought to have done.

I immediately procured suitable clothing, and on the 21st of October entered on board his Majesty's ship Enterprise, as a boy of the first class; in three days I was drafted to the Pembroke (74), rated landsman, and placed in the carpenter's crew, from which I was removed at my own request to the foretop.

In consequence of being a volunteer, I was allowed to go on shore almost every night; I went up from Deptford to London, brought this girl (Mary Linsey) down with me, took her on board, and asked the Commander leave to have a day on shore with my relative, as I styled her; I obtained leave for 48 hours, took her on shore, engaged ready-furnished lodgings, and came on shore every night until the 20th of December; the vessel was then ordered to the French coast to assist in blockading the French fleet. We sailed for Portsmouth, where this girl advised me to desert; and the captain of the foretop, with whom I was placed, said he was sure I must be some lad who had run away from my parents, and advised me to write to them, and get clear, but my stubborn heart would not stoop to acknowledge my fault. I wrote to Mary Linsey to return to her parents, or go to service, until the end of our cruise, and then I would desert. In going out of

Portsmouth, the ship struck on a rock, and became almost a wreck; however, she was got into harbour again, and while we remained there, I lived in the same evil practices, bringing this poor girl down as my wife; in two months we sailed, and after staying six months, we returned, and I found Mary Linsey, whom I seduced, had become an abandoned character, and died of disease.

On Sept. 16, 1813, I fell from the deck into the hold, was taken up insensible, and carried to Haslar Hospital; here, when my reason returned, I began to feel compunction for my conduct towards my father, and wrote where I was, and how I came there; his kindness to me was so great, that he came immediately to see me, forgave me, and supplied me with all I could desire; when I got better, I was sent to sea again, and remained in different ships until Dec. 4, 1815, when the ship I belonged to was paid off.

My father now prevailed on me to learn to be a shoemaker, but after a few weeks I grew tired of it, and began my evil practices again; and to get money, I forged the names of my shipmates, and obtained their prize-money, while they were at sea.

On the 17th of February, 1817, my dear father died; and a few weeks after I went to live with a silversmith, in Rathbone Place; here, during two months, I robbed my master of several watches, some plate, and a piece of gold weighing about three ounces. In a week after this I went to Liverpool, and different seaports; and in May, 1818, entered on board his Majesty's sloop Carnation, where I remained until Sept. 14, 1821. On the 25th of the same month I was married to a young woman of Plumbstead, near Woolwich; a very careful, industrious, and virtuous wife she was, but I treated her most shamefully by abandoning her, (merely because she reproved me for gambling,) after having lived with her little more than nine months.

After this I wandered about the country; got acquainted with a young woman at St. Mary Ottery, seduced her, and was about to marry her, when she died

suddenly. After this I endeavoured to defraud the public by getting a paper, with the King's coat of arms printed on it, filling it up with any thing which served my purpose: sometimes a shipwreck, sometimes a Prussian seaman in distress, at other times a Spanish, Portuguese, or Italian seaman, but most generally an American.*

I met with Mary Ann Taylor, the deceased, on the 1st of October, 1825, at Tetbury, Gloucester; I had known her at Bridgwater, where she resided with an uncle: she was at first seduced by her own cousin, she then left her home with a man, who after a time abandoned her; and when I met with her she was in a distressing state; I assisted her, and she lived with me until the October, when the fatal act took place, which deprived her of life, and will bring me to an untimely end.

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*There is room to fear, the public are too often imposed on by such means, and it is quite right they should be on their guard; with a little care, it is presumed, these impostors might often be detected.

It appears, that on the 19th of October, Thomas and the deceased were proceeding towards Marlborough, in company with the witnesses at the trial, and two or three other men who did not think fit to make their appearance at the trial; they stopped at the Wheat Sheaf public-house, Preshute, and remained there several hours drinking, and there, in a fit of rage and jealousy, (arising from the conduct of one of the party towards the deceased,) he struck this woman with a knife, with which he had just been peeling some chesnuts; the blow was given just above the breast bone, which separated the large blood vessel of the heart, and in fifteen minutes this unfortunate woman was a corpse.

On Monday, October 23, 1826, he was committed to Fisherton Gaol, Wilts, to take his trial for the murder. When he first came to the prison he was quite ignorant of the principles of Christianity, and their practical influence on the heart. In this state he remained for a month, occasionally reading a portion of Scripture in a careless manner, having no proper sense of his condition as an offender against the laws of his God.

A few days before his trial he gave me some writing, in which he had retraced his feelings and experience: it was written in the form of a diary, and from it I shall give some extracts.

It appears he heard a sermon in the Gaol Chapel, preached by the Rev. Mr. Eyres, from Psalm 139, 3: "Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways." He says, the text struck him very much, and that day he read the Scriptures more than he had done any day of his life. On the 21st of November he received a letter from a relative, a pious man; and this seems to have been the thing which first wrought effectually on his mind; he calls it "a strict and affectionate letter." The next day he solicited leave of the Governor to be in his cell a few hours every day, which was immediately granted: of this he says, "I asked the worthy and humane Governor to allow me a few hours in my cell during the day; this he immediately granted, and visited me every day when he was at home, offering me good advice; indeed he behaved towards me more like a Father than a Governor, and I feel I do not deserve the kind treatment which I receive from him and from the Turnkeys."

In addition to this, I think it right to add, that in no part of the world I have visited, have I seen a Gaol cleaner or better regulated, or officers who appeared better qualified for their duties, than those at Fisherton Gaol;—of the kindness of the Chaplain also, in lending him books, he often spoke with gratitude.

Sunday, Dec. 10, he heard a sermon on the parable of the Prodigal Son, preached by the Rev. Mr. Hodg-

son, under which he felt his heart much softened, and that day he prayed more than he had done any prior day of his life.

The next day was the first time of my visiting him; I found him very teachable and eager to receive instruction, but quite dark as to how he could be justified and saved. In the letter he wrote, entreating my colleague or myself to visit him, he calls himself the worst of sinners, and says he cannot see how he, whose hands were polluted with the blood of the poor woman, could expect mercy from God.

I endeavoured to explain to him the nature of the atonement, and how God, through Christ, could be just in pardoning the vilest sinner that believed in Jesus; I exhorted him to study the Sacred Scriptures, and spend much time in prayer; and having prayed with him, and given him some books which I thought would be useful, I left him. In the course of a few times visiting him, I found he began to have right views of the plan of salvation, and really was a broken-hearted sinner, seeking redemption through the blood of Christ; the sins of his whole life were arrayed before him, and, to use his own words, he saw that his life had been a continued scene of wickedness against God; I urged him on no account to rest until he obtained the evidence of his pardon, pointing him to various passages of the Word of God where this doctrine is held forth, and assuring him, every thing short of this would leave him in an unsafe state; so tender was his heart become, that tears were almost his meat and drink, he wept under every sermon he heard, and spent the greater part of his time in earnestly imploring mercy and pardon of God through Christ. A dream which he had about this time very much quickened him in seeking this blessing:—He thought himself in a country village, and saw a great many people going into a place of worship; he attempted to follow, but a man who stood at the door opposed his entering; he expostulated with the man for hindering such a sinner as he was from going, who had more need to be there than any one;

and in the midst of his endeavours to enter, he awoke, and immediately arose to pour out his heart to God in prayer.

On Thursday, Jan. 31, he rose at four o'clock, and, while at prayer, his soul was full of grief and pain, and he wept much without relief; he rose, and tried to walk up and down his cell, but could not; he attempted to sing, but could not; and sitting himself down, he felt as though his heart would have burst with grief; in this state he continued with little variation until the Monday following; that morning about four o'clock he was up, and says, he felt ready to sink under the weight of his sins—he felt as though he was on fire; when, in the midst of his distress, and while engaged in earnest prayer for mercy, the Lord broke in upon his soul, and his burden and grief were gone in a moment, and was succeeded by peace and love; his own words were nearly as follows: "In the midst of prayers and tears, I felt my burden and grief removed, and I could not forbear bursting out in praising my adorable Saviour; I was so full of joy, that for the moment I had forgotten where I was; I felt so relieved and so light, that I almost thought I was going to take my flight, to appear before my blessed Saviour, Jesus the Christ, who had thus washed me from my sins in his own blood, and made me a child of God. Oh, my soul, praise the Lord for ever and ever, for giving me the victory over sin, death, hell, and the grave!"——I shall not soon forget the joy and love which he manifested, the next time I visited him, after he had experienced this change: when I entered the cell, he was sitting on the floor engaged in writing, using his straw pallet as a desk; the moment I entered, he jumped on his feet, and seizing me by the hand, he exclaimed, "How glad I am to see you; now I know what you have told me is true; I do feel, God has in mercy pardoned my sins; I feel his love in my soul, I could rejoice to die this moment; thanks be to God for this blessing; oh, how happy I feel, I never thought I could be so happy as I feel this moment; glory be to God!" This happi-

ness in God he never lost one moment to the day of his death.

He says, "February 9th, I kept this day as a fast, but it was a feast to my soul; I feel so happy in the love of my Saviour, and it increases every day, I can now sit down and make a better and a happier meal upon a mouthful of bread than I ever did when I had every dainty; though I want not for necessaries, through the kindness of my dear friends; that the Lord may bless them, and every soul in the world, is the prayer of one who has been a complete heathen, an outcast from all religious society, a vile and wretched sinner; thanks be to my dear and blessed Saviour for plucking me from everlasting burning." As soon as the Lord had thus blessed him, he shewed at once the reality of his change by his care for the souls of the prisoners; he began immediately to warn them, and exhort them to forsake sin; and the unfortunate man who has since been executed was first awakened to a concern for his soul, through his (Thomas's) instrumentality;* he too, whose very language used to be blasphemy, could not now hear an oath without weeping and grieving that his master's name was dishonoured. His usual custom was to rise between 3 and 4 o'clock, and spend the time until daylight in prayer; as soon as he could see he began, and read until he went down from his cell; among the prisoners he spent his time in warning them and exhorting them to forsake sin and turn to God; when he returned to his cell at 4 o'clock, he read as long as he

* The man here alluded to (Henry Smith) was executed March 27th, for the violation of a female child. At his own request, my colleague and myself visited him during the last week of his life, and to our instructions he listened with the greatest eagerness and attention. So great was his ignorance when we first visited him, that he could not tell who Jesus Christ was: he had heard his name when he occasionally attended his Parish Church, but he knew not that he had been on earth, or that he had any thing to do with saving the souls of men; nor could this poor man read a word. The agony of his mind was great, and his prayer to God for mercy incessant. During the few days we visited him, he appeared to get light on the subject of Christianity: his repentance was evidently sincere, and there is good reason to hope, that his peace was made with God.

could see, and then spent his time in prayer, calling to mind every occurrence of the day, and in meditating on the love of Christ towards him; he used to call his cell his palace, and there he spent the greater part of his time.

As the time for his trial drew near, his happiness and comfort evidently increased, nor did that circumstance appear to beget one painful thought; he never expressed any wish to live, but chose death.

On the day of the trial he behaved in a manner becoming his awful situation, and he told me when I went to see him, after his return from Court to the Gaol, that the joy he felt when he got into the van was such, that he could not help singing praise to God.

On Sunday evening I visited him and remained until after 8 o'clock, his mind was in the same blessed frame, he seemed to count the hours with pleasure as they passed away, and rejoiced in the prospect of death: "To-morrow this time," said he, "I shall be in a better world." The peace and calm in which he seemed to possess his soul appeared really astonishing, and all that he feared about retiring to rest was, not that he should get no sleep, but that he should sleep too long.

On the morning of his execution I visited him early, he was just returned to his cell from the chapel, and there seemed as great a calm as though nothing of importance was to occur; "I have been thinking," said he, "on the words of our Lord to the dying thief," "This day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." "That will be my case to day, I feel happier, far happier, than I did the morning I was married, and I shall go to the drop with joy." Hearing the sound of the hammers used by the people employed in erecting the drop, he observed, "so happy and calm is my soul, that I could find it in my heart to go out and help them." About eleven o'clock he was called down to attend the service in the chapel; after staying about forty minutes he came out pinioned, and I met him in the yard; so full of desire was he to leave the world, and so absorbed in his own happy feelings, that he passed hastily along

towards the stairs leading to the top of the lodge, where the drop was erected, without seeming to notice any one.

In the room at the foot of the stairs, such a scene took place as I shall never forget: here the last service was performed; two clergymen were present beside the chaplain, and while the commendatory prayers were reading, no one could refrain from tears, while he himself was blessing and praising God, and appeared to be the happiest present; I took him by the hand just as he was about to go up the stairs, and the emphasis with which he uttered "God Almighty bless you; preach to sinners," will hardly ever be erased from my memory; at twenty minutes after twelve o'clock, after saying a few words to the crowd assembled, he was launched into eternity, and I have no doubt "conveyed by Angels into Abraham's bosom."

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